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ABSTRACT

An interview with W. Eugene Smith, well-known photographer and photographic essayist, is presented in this paper. The introductory section of the paper contains a biographical sketch of Smith and a discussion of his photographic essays on a number of topics, including World War II scenes, life in a Spanish village, the work of a black midwife in the backcountry of North Carolina, Albert Schweitzer, the city of Pittsburgh, and the town of Minamata, Japan, whose residents were poisoned by mercury. The interview itself deals with many issues related to Smith's photography and experiences. Among these are: the relationships among pictures that distinguish a photographic essay, the way Smith's photographic essays about Pittsburgh differ from photographs about Pittsburgh taken by "National Geographic" photographers, Smith's methods for approaching the making of a photographic essay, the role of the photographer in working with the people being photographed, the relationship of captions to the photographs in Smith's essays, and the importance of layout. (GT)

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Last Interview With W. Eugene Smith

On The Photo Essay

Paper To be presented to AEJ 1979

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W. EUGENE SMITH - FATHER OF THE MODERN PHOTO ESSAY

W. Eugene Smith is called the Father of the Modern Photo Essay. Of the living photographers, Smith stands out as one of the most talented, introspective, compassionate, and articulate.

Popular Photography magazine in 1962 described Smith, then forty-two, as the world's greatest photographer and called him the youngest living legend in photography. Life magazine described his essays as "the most memorable we have ever published." The

executive editor of Life, Wilson Hicks, said W. Eugene Smith made "the camera a part of himself, primarily emotionally, also aesthetically, intellectually and of course physically. He had a way of forcing himself into the machine and through it into his photographs."

Biography

Smith was born in Kansas in 1918. He wanted to design airplanes and took up photography so that he could take pictures of the planes that came through his home town of Wichita. His pictures soon began appearing in the local newspaper, and before long he grew more interested in photography than airplane design.

He worked for the Wichita Eagle and the Wichita Beacon. The sensational coverage of his father's suicide provoked bitter hatred of dishonest journalists.

He joined Newsweek magazine in 1937 but was fired the following year because he used what was considered a miniature camera, a 2¼" format twin lens reflex. Next he signed a retainer contract with Life in 1939, but in spite of a threat from the editors that if he quit he would get no further work from the magazine, he resigned in 1941. Smith felt he was in an assignment rut at Life and was uneasy about what he considered the magazine's shallow treatment of his material.

He covered World War II at first for Ziff-Davis Publishing Company and later for Life magazine, which regardless of the earlier warning, rehired him back. Obsessed with the gap

between the reality of war and the comfortable headline of war the people back home saw, the twenty-four-year-old war correspondent hurled himself into the front lines in the Pacific, and Europe trying to catch on film the horror of killing. Smith, who took part in twenty-three carrier combat missions, was the only correspondent to fly on the first carrier bombing of Tokyo. Leaving ships and planes, Smith next joined the foot soldiers. He followed thirteen invasions, taking some of the most heartbreaking and memorable pictures of the war - a tiny, fly-covered, half-dead baby held up by a soldier after being rescued from a cave in Spain; a wounded soldier, hideously bandaged, stretched out in Leyte cathedral; a decaying Japanese body on an Iwo Jima beach. Finally, on a ridge along the coast of Okinawa, Smith was hit by a shell fragment that ripped through his left hand, his face, and his mouth, critically wounding him.

Near the close of his two years of painful convalescence back home, Smith exposed the first negatives since his wounding. He went for a walk with his two children on a path in the woods, and just as they were approaching a clearing roughly arched by trees and illuminated by a bright shower of light, he clicked the shutter. The photograph, called the "Walk through to Paradise Garden," became internationally renowned and concluded the exhibition of "The Family of Man" produced by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art in ____.

In 1947 Smith was informed by Life magazine that his ability as a photographer would have to be proved again since he had been absent form photography for two years. During the next seven years, he produced his best-known set of essays: the exhausting dedication of a country doctor; the poverty and faith in a Spanish village; the pain of birth, life, and death being eased by a nurse midwife.

In the country doctor essay, Smith followed the life of one doctor who lived in the Colorado town of Memling. The burden and responsibility read clearly on Dr. Ceriani's face as he stitched up a young boy's head; the final photo in the essay shows him exhausted, drinking a cup of coffee in the kitchen of one of his patients.

The Spanish village essay was an assignment that was supposed to last six weeks but took six months. After searching throughout Spain for the right village, Smith chose Deleitosa, a town of twenty-three hundred residents that had changed little since medieval times. Smith's essay, following the life of a town, opens with a child taking her first communion and closes on the deathbed of one of the town's patriarchs. Smith's camera caught the common everyday activities: a young woman baking bread, an old woman spinning thread. His harshly lit portrait of Franco's rural police guard added tension to the essay.

Smith's own favorite among all his essays was one on a black midwife in the backcountry of North Carolina. "In

many ways it was the most rewarding experience photography has allowed me," he says.

In 1956, Smith photographed an essay, "Man of Mercy," about the life of Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Life wanted a traditional view of Schweitzer as the grandfatherly white saviour of the blacks of Africa, but Smith found the subject more complex. He resigned from Life in an attempt to affect the use of pictures and captions in the Schweitzer layout, but his resignation had no effect on the final appearance of the essay.

Smith believed that he should do his own developing and printing whenever he could and that he should have a hand in the layout of his pictures and a voice about the capitons. What the writer wrote, Smith held, was the writer entirely. Why then should not the picture story be completely the photographer?

After leaving Life, Smith began his most ambitious photo essay. He wanted to capture a whole city, Pittsburgh, on film. With the help of a Guggenheim grant, Smith finished the essay, eighty-nine photos were published in Photography Annual in 1958.

In 1971, along with his wife, Aileen, Smith went to Japan to produce a story on Minamata, the town that had been afflicted with mercury poisoning. A company, Chisso, had systematically dumped mercury-laden waste into the bay of Min mata, poisoning the fish and in turn poisoning the towns-people who ate the fish. The mercury the residents ingested began eating at their brain cells.

Smith describes the effects of the poisoning: "The nervous system degenerates-first a growing numbness of limbs and lips. Motor functions may become severely disturbed, the vision constricts, the speech slurs. In early, extreme cases, victims lapsed into unconsciousness and were agitated by involuntary movements, by uncontrollable shouting. Autopsies show that the brain becomes sponge-like, the cells eaten away." His photos show the victims, their gnarled hands resting useless on the bed. He documented through his photos the fight of the victims to receive restitution payments from the company.

Smith almost lost his eyesight covering the story. He and his wife, armed with camera and tape-recorder, accompanied a group of patients to record a meeting the group expected to have with an official of the company. The man failed to show up. "But," Smith relates, "suddenly, a group of about 100 men, on orders from the company, crowded into the room. They hit me first. They grabbed me and kicked me in the crotch and the cameras, then hit me in the stomach. Then they dragged me out and picked me up and slammed my head on the concrete." Smith survived but with limited vision in one eye. The photo essay was finally published in a book, Minamata.

INTERVIEW WITH SMITH ON THE PHOTO ESSAY

When I went to interview W. Eugene Smith in his New York loft on twenty-third street, he greeted me at the door wearing all black: black shoes, black socks, black pants, black belt and a black tee shirt. His hair was snow white. He looked like one of his own high-contrast black-and-white photos. His only point of color was his two bright blue eyes. He kindly greeted me and opened the steel door to his studio loft. Light streamed into the studio through the floor to ceiling window at one end of the large room. The light fell on stacks, boxes, and single prints covering every available flat surface in the studio. Tables, couches, chairs, and floor, were completely hidden under the piles of portfolio cases. Pinned casually on the wall were images that I had grown up with like "Women Spinning" from the Spanish village essay, and "Walk to Paradise Garden" from the "Family of Man" exhibit.

I found a folding chair for Smith to sit on, and we began the taped interview. Smith would listen to each question, pause, answer, then pause again. He was perhaps one of the most moral photographers who has tried to work with the big picture magazines. He wanted to follow through with his essays from creation to layout. Few editors allowed him this freedom, and Smith remembers every battle.

The Key Is Relationships Between Photos

Ken Kobre (KK): Your work in the early 1950s at Life, when you shot the photos about Spanish village, midwife, and country doctor, are known as the turning point in the photo essay. Would you describe what the photo essay was like before that period, say in the 1930s when Life first started?

W. Eugene Smith (WES): The difference between the early period and the later period was mainly that photographers in the beginning went out and made many pictures, and edited them. The picture did not have the same coherence as the work I did later.

KK: Where does the coherence come from? Is it planning?

WES: No. Just photographing with an awareness of the relationships instead of taking pictures that were just interesting. The more I knew the subject, the more I looked for certain relationships. I had concluded that the people or scenes had certain relationships to one another, and I would intensify my search for pictures to illustrate that relationship. I would photograph within that framework instead of just shooting at random. You can go out and take pictures forever, and still never pull together an integrated photographic sequence unless you have thought about the entire story or essay.

A collection of pictures so often is nothing more than a portfolio that you bring together, a group of photos that do not have the interrelationship that pictures of a photographic essay should have.

KK: Did the perception of the relationships come out as you worked on the project, or was it a result of what you knew before?

WES: It was the result of all of these things. As I worked on the project, I used to keep extensive notes, and I used to lay out photos every night, just to know what I had and what I needed to photograph.

KK: How about the end of Life? Were photographers still doing photo essays?

WES: No, I don't think they were doing photographic essays. In fact, I don't think that they ever did too many. As far as I know, I was the only one who tried to do essays.

KK: The new People uses many pictures about persons. How do you feel about the photos? Are they photo essays?

WES: Oh hell no!

KK: What is missing about them?

WES: There is no depth. The illustrations don't tell you anything in depth about the person.

KK: Is that because the photographers are not spending a long enough time with the subjects? Are the photographers going in with a preconceived notion about the people?

WES: Yes. The photographers are probably not taking enough time on each point. Also the editors don't have the space, or desire, to do an in-depth story. There are all kinds of chatty, gossip magazines which do not do the real kind of thing I am talking about.

KK: Are the individual pictures any worse or better than they were? Or is the problem that photographers don't integrate their photos to make a whole essay?

WES: Some of the pictures are fairly nice, but I don't think many of the pictures are very outstanding. In fact, I think the picture magazines are rather bad.

KK: You have compared a photo essay to a piece of music by Bach.

WES: I don't think that I ever compared it to a piece of Bach music. Actually, I would think the filming of a photo essay is more comparable to the writing of a play. I think that in both photo essay and play, you must have your beginning, your middle, and your end. Then you should establish the relationships between the parts (or the pictures) of the drama. You need to focus and show the emphasis you want.

KK: Can you explain the phrase "the relationships between the pictures." Can you tell us what you mean by this relationship?

WES: I can best describe the relationship as something that is optical and mental at once. One photograph says something about the subject. The next photograph may amplify on that subject, or the picture may add its own dimension to the subject. When you have two photographs or perhaps three, together they establish a special point which gives three different viewpoints. Sometimes the relationship of the pictures can be contradictory; sometimes the connection can

be complementary; but sometimes I've taken three entirely different pictures, and made them work together, because each picture stated a different point, yet together had a relationship that invited many thoughts instead of a single one.

KK: Are there examples from some of the stories you shot that summarize this kind of interrelationship between pictures, where we can see the second picture build on the first picture?

WES: Yes, I know that in the Pittsburgh essay, I started out with a photograph of a worker with the flare of a vesper furnace in his face. I specifically took this photo for the lead picture in the essay because I wanted to show industry in Pittsburgh as "the arsenal to the world", that is what they used to call the city. I wanted to show that the worker was fairly well submerged beneath the weight of industry, the anonymity of the worker's goggles and the factory behind him told the story. Still, I did not want the worker to be entirely lost as a human being. A second picture, which I used on the open spread of the layout in Popular Photography, showed the ROTC officers who trained troops of students on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh. As the officers were giving commands, the trainees just stared into trees. So here we have two pictures of the "arsenal of the world." First we have a shot of the workers in the steel factory. Then we have another photo of people preparing to use the arsenal while being educated. I was beginning to set up a feeling for the city and its complexity.

The third picture in the spread was simply a rather moody street sign which said, "Love." This selection was probably subjective, because I wanted to get the feeling of love in the arsenal, in the training field, and in education. Love was also an important element even though it was represented by a shadowy street sign. In my mind, these three pictures set up the three themes as a counterpoint for the remainder of the picture essay.

That picture essay was unlike most of my other essays before where the individuals were the leading persons. The city was the leading "person" in this instance, and the job I had set for myself was to project the city as hero or villain, and have everything else give credence to this feeling about the city. There have been many essays on Pittsburgh, but I think in my pictorial layout, you had the feeling of people, and of the city, and you felt that you could recognize the city from my pictures. The layout was rather complex, and many people felt I wasted pictures by printing many of them too small but it was not my purpose to show what a great photographer I was, but give a person the feeling of Pittsburgh, and the experience of the city.

Compares photo essay to National Geographic story

KK: Did your essay differ from National Geographic?

WES: Yes. My pictures were rejected by the National Geographic. One of the criticisms leveled at my story by the Geographic editors was that it had too much emotion and

was not pictorial enough. I tried to take a point of view and interpret the city and its moods. I ended up using thirty-eight different pictures of the city. Popular Photography published this essay. Although both magazines, Popular Photography and National Geographic, ahd thirty-eight pictures, you had a feeling of the city in my pictures, but the reader received far less understanding of Pittsburgh in the National Geographic layout.

KK: Did you take the same subjects as the Geographic's cameramen?

WES: In many instances, yes.

KK: Did you view the same subjects differently from the Geographic cameramen?

WES: We both took pictures of the University of Pittsburgh. The Geographic photographers simply made the point that the university was located in the city. My photos tried to link the educational institution with the other important aspects of Pittsburgh-the manufacture of armaments. My picture showed the university on a hill, isolated, against the swirling smokestacks from the factories down below. I tried to transcend the editorial point I was making and sought also to produce a fine photograph. National Geographic used each picture in its essay to make a single point. The magazine photos did not look for any relationship between the segments of the city, and the photos rarely transcended their informative level to become fine photos.

KK: And National Geographic just sets out to document facts, but rarely do the factual pictures add up to an

interpretation story. Is that right?

WES: Yes.

KK: Before you shoot a picture, do you know what you want to state in it? Did you have, for example, an understanding of where the university stood in relation to the town, both physically and emotionally, and you wanted to show that?

WES: Well, yes. I drove through the streets of the city often, and I also walked through them. Sometimes I passed the same scenes a hundred times. But the scenes did not appear to me to make a striking photograph. Then one day, I saw the elements of a great shot, and so I worked on that scene and shot it. I always carried a map with me and a compass. Sometimes I would discover a scene that I would want to shoot to show a certain light-for example, a U.S. Steel plant. And I would say to myself, "This is a good place to photograph, but the light is wrong, the situation is bad." And I would mark that place on the map and determine what time of day I thought the light would be right for the situation. Then I would come back and shoot the photo.

KK: How long did you work on the entire essay?

WES: I don't know. I think it was about three to six months.

I don't use a shooting script to organize

KK: How did you organize your approach to a photo essay for Life magazine.

WES: Life often prepared complete shooting scripts. The magazine designed time and place and lighting conditions. The aim of these scripts was to make sure that a photographer would narrow his focus and would cover all the points.

KK: Did you ever use a shooting script?

WES: No. I made my own as I went along, writing down those points that I felt were important to cover, but my subjects grew out of the situation.

KK: Did you do any of the other writing as you did in the case of Schweitzer?

WES: Yes. The writing kept the subject fresh in my mind. I would write questions that had to be answered. This made for a busy schedule since I had to photograph, write, and develop the film at night.

KK: When you were in Africa or in other foreign places, did you develop your own film on the spot?

WES: Always.

KK: Would you print pictures at that point?

WES: No. I would not even make contacts. I would just look at the negatives.

KK: Where did the ideas come from for your photo essays? Newspapers, books, experiences with people?

WES: Often editors of magazines originate the ideas, and I develop them along the lines I think suitable. "Country Doctor" was suggested by Life editors but was done much

differently than they expected. As a matter of fact, I had to sneak out of town to do it. Life was trying to get more mileage out of me as a photographer. I contrived with a friend of mine to sneak out of town to have time to do the "Country Doctor." Fortunately it was one of the most successful stories the magazine ever published, and I got away with it.

The midwife story was my idea. "Spanish Village" came from the suggestion of a story on food. As much as possible, I tried to suggest to the editors the subject of my essays, because, this way, I could be sure of working on something I wanted to do.

My ideas also come from a chance remark in a bar, or in any other place. The Minimatta essay came directly from a Japanese who suggested that I photograph Minimatta. Minimatta was a Japanese city whose population was devastated by mercury poisoning. I knew nothing about it. I had never even heard of the incident before, but when I learned a little bit about it, I decided to photograph the story.

The best way to find ideas for photo essays is to be immersed in enough activities and different people so that you keep your mind stimulated. You should think not only of photography but what is going on in the world.

KK: Are there certain subjects that don't make good photo essays?

WES: I'm sure of this. For instance, an essay on the city as a whole would be a mistake. There is no beginning;

there is no end. The subject is too vast and endless. There is no way you can bring coherence to the subject in a few pages. It is much better to photograph individuals in their limited relationship to life. The grave mistake that Life used to make was that the editors would do an issue called "Americans in Europe" or something like that. The photographers could never get close enough to anybody, so that cameramen ended up by making editorial point pictures, covering lots of space, lots of territory. The photo showed very little that had insight or was memorable.

KK: Do you ever have the problem of having to take a typical subject or stereotyped subject to represent a more general theme?

WES: I don't think the man in "Country Doctor" is typical. He is absolutely unique.

KK: Is this true of all your subjects? They are all basically unique?

WES: I think so. I don't think there is anything that is typical. I guess there is a new issue of Life out. Have you seen it? Something about the youth of America. This sounds to me like another one of these overblown themes.

KK: Do you think that the pictures or the youth issue of Life are preconceived? That is, the editors decide what a young adult should look like and then assign photographers to go out and find these subjects.

WES: This very often happens. The editors feel they have to cover a certain point and they assign just for that purpose. Once at Life, the editors wanted to do an essay about teenagers. The editors wanted to produce the essay to represent all teenagers. This was ridiculous. First, the editors had decided that seventeen was the crisis year in a teenager's life. But there is no such year which is the crisis point for everyone. The stringer freelance photographers lined up a whole group of candidates for the typical American teenager was that he had his own car. That is one reason why the editors ruled out New York as the scene for the photos because few teenagers who live in the city have their own cars. Of course, the auto requirements would rule out also families that were too poor.

I had said that I would do the essay if the editors ruled out the phrase "typical teenager." We went around and interviewed several people and finally found someone in New Orleans who was a good subject. He did not happen to have his own car. He had some problem as to where he was going to college, a goal which most of the others were set on. And he was going to have to work for his tuition that summer on a steamer. His life had some of the elements of drama, and he had some character. Then the editors and I had a meeting about the essay, and I said I thought I could do a good essay about this young man. I pointed out, however, that he didn't have his own car. But above all, he was not typical. Finally,

however, I concluded, I could not do the story, because the editors had a preconceived notion of what they wanted.

Researching a subject does not create a bias

KK: Tell me about the research that you carried out before shooting a story. I heard that you did extensive research before you did a photo story, such as "Spanish Village."

WES: I read much about Spain before I went there, as I was interested in that country for many years. [Smith spent many months traveling in Spain looking for the right village he wanted to photograph. Then he settled on a certain village.]

KK: Did you look at pictures that had been taken of the place?

WES: Sure, I looked at pictures just as I had read widely about the country.

KK: Did this cause a problem when you arrived? Did you already have a bias resulting from your reading about what others have said and the pictures they had taken?

WES: No, because I immediately started all over. I mean, I had some knowledge, but I found the people and the place different from what I expected.

KK: I suppose you researched Albert Schweitzer when you expected to do a photo essay on him. Did you have a bias before you started?

WES: I had read all his books and thought it would be rather easy to strike up a rapport with him. When I went to meet him, I found that he was vastly different from what I had expected.

KK: Why?

WES: Those who had written about him had especially idealized him, and left him not quite mortal. I found, however, he had to make compromises.

KK: Like what?

WES: In the leper village, for instance, Schweitzer would let a clean child remain with leperous parents. He would not say, "Take the clean child away." Instead, Schweitzer would say, "If I take the clean child away, there will be no place for him to go to. His parents will leave also, and they will be in the forest where I cannot watch them, and they will spread the disease."

When Schweitzer first got to the village, his European training called for the amputation of a native's leg that was badly crushed. But if Schweitzer amputated, he would have become known as "the butcher doctor", and would not have become known for saving lives. Through compromise, he learned a new way of saving lives.

KK: None of this is revealed in the article that you printed in Life.

WES: No; this was one of the reasons that I resigned over the story.

KK: Did you resign after the story was printed?

WES: No; I resigned before it was printed, trying to force the editors to give some consideration and space necessary to tell the story right.

KK: Now the words accompanying this article suggest

that Schweitzer was pure gold, but certainly don't indicate some of these moral questions. Did the editors know about the questions?

WES: Yes. They knew the problem.

KK: Did Life feel that the American public could not deal with these contradictions about Schweitzer?

WES: Yes.

Shooting Strategy: The Unobserved Observer

KK: You previously talked about two kinds of methods of shooting. One you describe as the unobserved observer, and the other you describe as the intimately accepted participant. I was wondering how you are able to remain an unobserved observer, especially when you use flash?

WES: I don't really use flash or strobe. My lighting just looks like that because I am actually aware of lighting. I use lighting rather dramatically. That doesn't mean to say that I don't use the strobe at any time. My view about lighting is to use natural or available light, according to the situation. I ran across a picture the other day made solely by the light of miners' helmets. When you are using strobes or flash, it is very difficult to be the unobserved observer. As I say, I very seldom use any artificial light anymore.

KK: In most of your essays, do you go the other route to be the accepted participant? How do you become intimately accepted? How long did you stay with the midwife in the essay "The Midwife?"

WES: Six weeks altogether. I didn't wait very long before I took the first photographs of her, but you never know if the first ones are very valid. You never know if it is going to work. Will the relationship be compatible? I've been very fortunate in that many of my subjects have cooperated fully.

KK: Are there any things you do to help along this acceptance?

WES: It all depends on the subject I'm working on. I try to be friendly and understanding. I try not to intrude. I'm very careful of the moments when I feel they are being pressed too hard, and I pull back. I just try to be a decent person and be accepted as a decent person and photograph with the slightest intrusion possible.

KK: Do you ever direct or pose the subjects?

WES: I wouldn't absolutely rule out these methods if toward the end of an essay, I know a certain relationship between the subjects is true to the story and yet the relationship just does not seem to be coming about naturally. At that time, I might take steps to set the connection. If there are two people together, I might move their chairs closer so that the people will show a better relationship. As far as directing a photo, it happens so seldom that I cannot remember the last time it happened. Yet if I really felt that it was absolutely essential to the truth of the story, I would not hesitate to pose the subjects. Usually I don't do it.

KK: Is that because you have the time to wait for the proper moment for a photograph?

WES: Well, I've forced situations to occur that would have taken longer to happen by themselves. Newspaper photographers are in a difficult spot.

KK: How long did you wait with the doctor in the essay about him?

WES: Twenty-three days and twenty-three nights.

KK: Was it because of the emotional situations in the doctor's life that you got honest pictures, or did he simply get used to you after twenty-three days and forget about you?

WES: He pretty much forgot about me, and also I worked very quietly. In his office, I had some photo floods set up. When we went into the office, I turned them on to get a little more light.

KK: Will you often introduce artificial lighting in a room?

WES: If necessary. On the midwife story, I knew I would have to have additional light, because I knew that in these little dark cabins there was little light. As the people were blacks, there was just no way I could photograph them without additional light. Before the birth of the child, a situation shown in the sequence, I visited the home and put a couple of white cards to hook a couple of strobes to.

KK: How about the spanish village essay. What lights did you use for the final deathbed picture?

WES: I had a single light bulb on. The room was lit only by candlelight. I used the candlelight, never said a single

word, and stayed for only three frames, because I did not wish to intrude.

KK: At what point do you become an intruder?

WES: I don't know. It's entirely a matter of subjective judgment. I intrude a lot less than many photographers whom I watch. They become acutely embarrassing at times.

KK: Do these obvious photographers affect the situation?

WES: Yes, they do, and they are seldom able to get as intimate a photograph as I am able to get. The cameramen have interrupted the situation. They have antagonized the people and torn their attention from what they are emotionally involved in. An example of the intrusion: When I'm giving lectures, cameras don't bother me at all. But when I'm photographing, and someone takes a picture of me and my subject, this really upsets me. I cannot work that way.

KK: You have taken some pictures in color. When is the best time to use color?

WES: Well, the kinds of essays that I do are done best in black and white because color too often produces its own emotion separate from the subject. It's not that color is not valid, because it is. Color is a very strong tool of illustration, but I don't like to use color. I think my subjects just do not lend themselves to color.

KK: Are there any subjects that lend themselves better to color?

WES: Yes, but I don't know which.

Captions cause the reader to think

KK: What is the relationship of the captions or text block to your pictures? Are captions necessary?

WES: Very important, because you can say in words what you cannot say in pictures. Captions which merely repeat what is in the photograph are ridiculous. In the "Midwife," several pictures showed the midwife with a Coleman miner's lantern sitting behind her while she was working. The captions stated that she uses the lantern because she does not have electricity. I felt this point was rather obvious to everybody. This fact in the caption was a waste of words and space. The captions should have said something about what she was doing beyond the scope of the pictures.

KK: What kinds of things cannot be shown in pictures and therefore require words?

WES: I shot a war picture in which there is a shell explosion. In the caption, I simply say, "Sticks and stones and bits of human bones." You can say something in the caption that will cause the viewer and the reader to think more. Then consider the picture of the baby being pulled out from under the rock. The caption said that, "The baby's head was under a rock. It's head was pushed in and its eyes were full of pus. We hoped it would die." The picture might have moved you on your own, but when printed with the caption, the photo had much greater impact in intensity and emotion.

KK: Had you written the captions for your previous pictures before you worked for Life?

WES: Life gave me as little cooperation as possible.

KK: In the Pittsburgh and the Minamata essays, did you write the text blocks?

WES: Yes.

KK: When you were with Life, did you feed the editors with information with which to write the captions, or did they send reporters to write the story, and to write the captions later?

WES: On such essays, as the "Midwife," I did all the research. The reporters wrote the story from my research.

KK: In the Aperture book about your pictures, there are some small captions, but many of the pictures are uncaptioned. Is that by your choice?

WES: That was by my choice because I considered that book a portfolio.

KK: Rather than an example of parts of your essays?

WES: Mainly, yes. I did not try to add more captions to the pictures because the original volume was supposed to be a throwaway for the big book, which would use many of the same pictures. Whether the big book will ever come out or not, I don't know.

KK: What should be the relationship between the photographer and the writer? Should there be the photo writer and not a separate reporter?

WES: That all depends on the people involved. I wrote the text blocks for "Minamata". A great deal depends on how

much understanding there is between the people involved.

KK: Is writing something you think the photographer should learn to do.

WES: Some people cannot learn to write. Some people cannot learn to take pictures either. You don't have to have multiple talents.

Picture layout is like music writing

KK: You had many arguments with the editors of Life magazine over layouts. Do you consider layout as important as taking the pictures?

WES: Certainly, because you can make a story go in many different directions. It can be done with vast distortion. It can be superficial or it can be made strong, whatever the layout says. Layout is the construction of the groundwork of the photographic essay.

KK: When you were not photographing, you said that you went home at night and did layouts. Do you consider horizontals and verticals when you are taking the picture?

WES: Yes. I very frequently try to frame a picture both as a vertical and a horizontal. Then when it comes to the picture layout, I'm able to use the photo that fits the design best. There are real problems in layout. Often the photographer is not aware of these problems if he has never designed a page.

KK: Did you study layouts or did you learn it on your own?

WES: I learned by actual experience. If I were an editor of a magazine, I would insist that a photographer be in on making the layouts.

KK: How do you go about editing all your contacts? Do you pick out the best photos, then make prints, then work them into a layout?

WES: I usually make piles of the groups with possibilities and then work from there.

KK: Which kinds of pictures should be played small?

WES: Sometimes you can use very good pictures and play them small, whereas if you were doing an exhibit, you would want to make them oversize. With the essay, you have to relate to what you are trying to say in the essay and not flatter yourself as a photographer. You can have a picture that is so good, that you hate to play it small. You have to think of a way to use it large legitimately.

KK: When you are laying out an essay, do you plan the beginning, middle, and the end, and let the other things fall into line?

WES: I do it very many different ways. Perhaps laying out the format begins with the ending; perhaps the layout begins with the opening. Sometimes the laying-out step begins by featuring certain interior relationships I know have to go together. After that, I build from either end of the layout. Layout patterns all depend on the subject. I lay essays out according to the same principle used in music, which has a beginning, middle, and end.

KK: What do you mean when you say that you "lay it out according to music?"

WES: It is a very private way of working so that I have pace, rhythm, and drama in the right places. The final layout has a coherency and a drama in it.

KK: How can you speed up the essay, using pictures, and how can you slow it down?

WES: There are lyrical pictures, and there are those which are strongly recorded.

KK: Can you give me an example of these two types?

WES: In the "Midwife," the picture story of the midwife for the birth to take place is a very quiet picture. It did not have to be the opening picture, but it established a mood. The picture of her waiting is poignant. Then the picture of the actual birth is a very strong chord, where the impression lasts a long time.

KK: Do you think people will study this photo longer than other pictures?

WES: Whether they do or not, I feel it works on their emotions.

KK: Now the ending pictures show the midwife holding up the child to a group of nurses or training midwives. Why was that chosen as the end picture?

WES: That was a way of passing on the learning feature.

KK: Did you want to have the opening which has birth in it and the closing which has the passing on? Was that a conscious plan?

WES: It was fairly conscious. I sat in on layouts and had many a battle with the editors, but never did I have the final right to withdraw the story, even when it was being misused. When I resigned, I told the editors I would return if I had the power to determine the layout, the story, and pictures.

KK: When you originally took the pictures, did you have any idea that this one would be an opening picture, and this one would be the closing picture?

WES: Yes, because I made layouts every night and slowly built the story exactly as you see it there. I tried to get as close as I can to the plan.

KK: When you did the "Country Doctor," your final closing picture showed the doctor slumped down with a cigarette. Was that preconceived? Did you want to end the essay with that picture?

WES: It was entirely logical that there would be some photograph which would show he was very tired. I did not know until I made the layout it would be that particular picture which would end the story.

KK: Have you ever had to go back when you realized that you did not have the pictures you wanted and had to pose them?

WES: No; The nearest to that situation occurred was in the Pittsburgh story, when the night before I left, I went through all the negatives I had and decided that I did not have the one showing man almost defeated-he was submerged

by industry but not quite. I went out and shot that photo. It turned out to be the last photo I made. It was definitely an eye-opener.

KK: Do you think photo essays are going to come back again?

WES: I think they could come back again. They would have to be edited differently. I think Life could make a comeback too.

KK: In the future will books be developed along photo essay lines?

WES: Such books could have a good future but only a few thousand persons see a book rather than a few million who would see an essay in a magazine.

KK: How many people have seen your book Minamata?

WES: I don't know how many have seen it. It has sold upwards of thirty-five thousand copies. This figure is still a lot lower than Life circulation, which was six million.

KK: What effect has the book had?

WES: The pictures have helped the Japanese victims to win the sympathy of the Japanese nation. The book also had the effect of helping to get new laws enacted in Japan. The book is constantly being used in court for litigation in Japan and the United States. The book has helped also bring more attention to the mercury situation in Canada.

KK: Have other similar pictorial books followed from this one?

WES: I'm sure there have been some. Many articles have been written about the book, and it got tremendous press coverage. That was an additional way the book's influence was felt.

KK: What was it like to write a book project as most of your other essays were just a few pages in Life?

WES: I took my time. I had no deadline to worry about. I spent three and a half years on the book.

KK: Did you become a figure known to the people whose pictures you took?

WES: Oh, yes. I became known to a great number of Japanese. Japanese television stations put me on the air and explained who I was and what this foreigner was doing in their country. It was like our quiz shows. In some ways I became somewhat of a national folk hero. I walked along the streets and people recognized me. They just grew very fond of me and my wife, Aileen. In fact, we still get letters asking us when we are coming back. I have not been back since the book was published.

KK: How was the book received in Japan?

WES: Very well. Of course, the Japanese could not read the English, but they could see the pictures. Even the Japanese prime minister asked me for my autograph.

KK: Are you planning any photo essays for the future?

WES: Yes, but I don't know what they are now. They will probably be in book form, but I may start a magazine and sell it on the street.